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↑ The Haringey Borough Council's Design Review Panel in action

Haringey's Panel was set up in 2005 to help supplement the capacity of the then new and relatively small in-house design team. Since its inception, it has seen on average eight developments per year, ranging from medium-sized schemes to major regeneration projects of over 1000 units. Haringey's current practice already positively addresses a number of the principles set forward in CABE's new guidance. The panel is made up of a range of professions from the built environment, including architecture, urban design, landscape architecture, engineering, conservation and town planning. Reviews take place only at the pre-application stage, helping to ensure that feedback can be incorporated at an early point in the design's development. The panel also uses the Building for Life criteria as a framework for discussion on residential schemes. This practice helps ensure objectivity in the assessment and is successful in helping to avoid personal aesthetic opinions from dominating the conversation. The panel's comments also revolve around the users of the proposed development and offer particular criticisms to help improve the quality of the proposals.

While the panel has always maintained a strictly advisory role, a number of community groups have recently approached the Council to request representation on the panel. The panel managers felt this would be inappropriate as the panel was intended to be a specifically design-oriented advisory group and community input could be more meaningfully captured through other existing forums. The Independent and Expert principles in CABE's guidance lends support to this position and helps reaffirm the panel's role in the decision making process.

● Anne Stevenson, freelance urban designer

The principles also help refocus panel management on key points. Accessibility is a reminder of the importance of relating feedback to the design officer promptly and consistently in order that comments can be incorporated into the planning process. Accountability calls for more consistent reporting on panel activities to the wider council management and elected members, which will help raise awareness of the panel's role and impact. Monitoring allows panel members the opportunity to see the influence of their work and the positive role their feedback can have. This is particularly helpful in maintaining the motivation of these voluntary members.

The new guidance does leave some gaps that may require further thinking by local panels. The Proportionate principle does not address the question of what role a local panel should play in major applications that are already being reviewed by CABE or other sub-regional reviews. It is felt by some that it is a waste of the panel's expertise to have them doubling up on schemes already receiving detailed design review and that greater impact could be made by the panel if more modest schemes were focused on.

Also, although this has yet to be a significant problem, it is unclear what should be done if there is conflict from the different levels of review. Although final judgement always rests with the development control case officer, contradictory advice may be seen to undermine the objectivity and value of the review process and may be another reason to avoid duplication.

A more specific challenge that has been faced in recent months is how to maintain regular meetings as the frequency of major applications has slowed down as a result of the recession. One approach Haringey has taken to tackle this problem is to involve the panel in more strategic planning issues such as the Core Strategy and emerging Sustainable Design & Construction guidance. There has also been discussion of using their expertise in developing site briefs and area master plans, which would help ensure design values are incorporated in Council strategies from the start.

CONCLUSION

While the benefits of a design panel can be considerable, both CABE's research and Haringey's experience show that a number of fundamental aspects must be in place in order for the panel to work effectively. A skilled and diverse panel with a clear mandate and rules of operation are crucial aspects in ensuring quality outcomes from the design review process. Integration with the wider planning process is also essential. Maintaining a strong connection with development control can help ensure the right schemes are referred to the panel, and that their comments result in tangible design improvements and help inform the decision-making process. The new guidance from CABE, the RTPI, RIBA and the Landscape Institute provide valuable advice on these issues, helping to strengthen existing practice and contribute to the ongoing success of existing and future panels. ●

FIFE COUNCIL URBAN DESIGN TRAINING

Marilyn Higgins and Leslie Forsyth wonder what difference training makes to the quality of design



In 2006 Fife Council was awarded a commendation in the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning for its *Fife Urban Design Action Plan*. The judges were impressed with the 19 service improvements demonstrating strong commitment to raising design quality, highlighting in particular the proposed officer and elected member training.

This article charts the development of design awareness in policy and development management and reflects on the effects that officer and member training has had on practice. The evaluation is based on written questionnaires distributed at the conclusion of each training session as well as interviews with officers and members between one and three years later.

CONTEXT

Fife is a historic unitary coastal authority in the central belt of Scotland, containing both urban and rural areas and diverse landscapes. It has a growing population of 362,000 within 500 sq. miles and typically receives about 4,000 planning applications a year. It is divided into three areas in terms of service provision: St. Andrews and East Fife, Kirkcaldy and mid Fife and Dunfermline and West Fife.

Scotland has been promoting urban design in a broadly similar way as elsewhere in the UK. Fife has been one of the more proactive local authorities in terms of initiatives to raise design quality. These aspirations were motivated by the Scottish Government's *Designing Places* policy promoting the design agenda and a realisation that good quality development on the ground is what planning should be about, but was not being achieved often enough. A specialist officer in urban design was appointed in 2006 to co-ordinate Council action. Today there is a team of three. The *Urban Design Action Plan* referred to in the introduction gave effect to the Council's *Urban Design Guide*, produced in 2005. This is supplementary planning guidance and therefore a material consideration when determining development applications. The chair and vice-chair of the planning committee have been

nominated as Design Champions, another outcome from the *Action Plan*.

TRAINING PROGRAMME

Urban Design Training (Marilyn Higgins and Leslie Forsyth) was approached in 2006 to prepare a bespoke programme of training for officers and members of the Council. Since then there have been two courses of training for both officers and members, with a third course for officers about to start. The general aim of the officers' training is to improve knowledge and understanding of urban design principles and to develop skills in design briefing. The authors refined a programme similar to what they had successfully delivered to authorities elsewhere in Scotland. It was delivered in a series consisting of six full days, approximately one every two weeks. Twelve officers attended the first course and thirteen the second. The participants were from planning policy, development management, transportation and community services (parks).

It was explicit from the start that the course would be highly interactive and this drove the timing and structure. There was a clear expectation that participants would need to be involved in considerable work, both during the sessions and in between. The training days were divided into two main themes, one dealing with seminars on a range of subjects relevant to urban design, such as permeability, use of public space and space syntax. One officer had to prepare and lead each seminar using illustrated examples from Fife. The second session dealt with design briefing for selected local sites, creating a situation in which each participant both drafted and responded to a design brief. In addition, there were talks each week on specific and requested subjects by the trainers, and participants were invited to bring current planning applications for discussion.

Elected members' training took place in blocks of four hours at different times of the day in different locations to encourage attendance. The programme included reflection on places in Fife based on participants' own experience, a review of central government and Fife initiatives illustrating key

↑ The diverse scale, character and significance of Fife's settlements



↑↑ Cuparmuir site entrance, scheme originally rejected
↑ Balcomie Green, Crail, corner emphasis

urban design principles, an exercise applying these principles in decisions about planning applications and a discussion about the role of members in relation to other participants in the planning process.

There was a clear expectation that participants would need to be involved in considerable work, both during the sessions and in between

The training is seen as an initial grounding in urban design, from which a continuing programme is being developed by the Council. A new workshop about contemporary design versus a historicist approach aimed at both officers and members is currently being planned. Members are also being briefed about a newly developed *Fife Sustainability Checklist* and recent urban design trips (Poundbury, Upton, Freiburg, Greenwich Millennium Village) undertaken as part of the Council's Designing Sustainable Communities initiative.

OFFICERS

Feedback at the end of the training courses was very positive. After the training had been completed, officers formed a group to support each other in promoting learning from the course in their daily work. Officers contacted recently unanimously confirm that the training has resulted in greater motivation and job satisfaction.

Three years after the first training, participants from the policy team report that greater understanding about the principles of built form and open space has strengthened their ability to convey constructive information to colleagues, developers and other professions. They highlight the importance of communication and working together; the recognition of the importance of design by everyone involved in the process, including managers; and the production of well-articulated design policy, guidance and briefs to justify decisions. A result is increased confidence and assertiveness in challenging proposals and defending professional opinions on design matters. The training directly spawned activity resulting in improved policy and increased guidance. The Council commissioned Gillespies LLP to produce the *Fife Masterplans Handbook* to guide major settlement expansion, which won the Commendation for Development Management in the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning 2007. The latest drafts of local plans include diagrammatic strategic development frameworks for major land allocations that are in line with urban design principles discussed as part of the training. Officers acknowledge that a culture change has begun, including amongst some councillors. One policy officer moved from Fife to Moray Council in Scotland and was instrumental in initiating similar training there.

Development management officers report that the practical nature of the training has meant that they are able to apply the principles in their daily work, insisting, for example, that in housing layouts streets join up, open space is well defined and overlooked, front doors face the street, a mixture of house types is included and cars are not allowed to dominate. A significant shift occurred after the first training course, when, for the first time, a housing development was refused on design grounds in Cuparmuir, based on the new *Design Guide*. The decision was appealed by the developer but the Council won the public inquiry. This success set a precedent in that it gave other officers increased confidence to ensure that the principles in the guidance are being adhered to, resulting in a number of cases of improved applications. Officers had considerable input in terms of urban design in a new housing development at Balcomie Green, Crail.

MEMBERS

Members were also positive about the training immediately afterwards. The chair of the planning committee notices that basic urban design messages about a sense of place are beginning to take root, becoming more ingrained in daily discussions. He cites the example of the urban design framework in the new plan for St. Andrews and East Fife, which aims to promote connectivity, amongst other design principles, and believes that guidance is essential early in the process for large capital projects. The vice-chair of the planning committee states that

the training helped councillors think about how proposals conform to urban design principles, not just how many people objected. Both believe that the role of the three permanent specialist urban design officers has been important in raising the profile and co-ordinating action. However, they acknowledge that councillors are learning about many things all at once and more needs to be done to engage members. One suggests that the slowdown in the economy is a good time to upgrade skills and improve guidance. The chair and vice-chair of the planning committee are named as the Council's Design Champions. Both agree that this role has remained underdeveloped, with the chair asserting that promoting good quality urban design is integral to his position in any case.

CONCLUSIONS

The example of Fife Council illustrates an authority which has taken the urban design agenda very seriously. It has created a set of documents providing excellent information for developers which have been recognised nationally, established positions to lead urban design initiatives, promoted a programme of learning for officers and members and is beginning to see evidence that these measures are leading to improvements in the quality of development on the ground. The role of specialist officers in promoting urban design and co-ordinating action across the whole authority has been important, especially where officers are scattered across geographical areas.

Although it is still early in terms of effects on the ground, the examples mentioned above illustrate that there is a growing confidence to ensure that development proposals conform to basic urban design principles, for example, clearly distinguishing public and private space, joining up streets and having building entrances facing onto the street.

It becomes clear from the experience of Fife, and this is backed up by the trainers' experience in five other local authorities in Scotland, that there are several critical recommendations when a local authority embarks on a training programme, if real change is to be effected in the long term. First, it is essential that continued training takes place over a sufficiently long period to be able to reach a large proportion of people, if not everyone, whose job is involved with urban design, including officers who have newly joined the Council. Initial training should be followed up with other topics and reflection on what has been achieved, deepening the learning. Secondly, it also needs to be of sufficient length and depth to be effective in changing mindsets and instilling confidence, challenging assumptions and leading to action. To this end, the importance of interactive as opposed to passive learning cannot be overstated. Finally, the value of having all of those involved in both policy and management of development undergoing this training ensures that there is a common thread in the authority's approach. One aspect of training groups from different parts of the planning department and other departments together which emerges regularly is the improvement in the level of dialogue and communication within the organisation, resulting in positive collaborative outcomes.



← Balcomie Green designed with significant input from officers

However, the ultimate value of the whole exercise is what is happening on the ground and it is that which will eventually define the real success or failure of the training. Urban design is complex and culture change takes a long time. There is evidence that the culture has started to change in Fife but much remains to be done, with officers, members and local communities. For example, transportation officers took part in the urban design training

There is a growing confidence to ensure that development proposals conform to basic urban design principles

and the Council has started to revise policies but their translation into practice will define their worth. There is an urgent need now to put new design policies and guidance into practice so that more good examples are produced on the ground. The Fife case shows that a firm foundation of training initiatives can instil confidence, facilitate dialogue and promote change. But it is not in itself a guarantee of significant change: this depends on strong and sustained leadership and commitment from both members and officers if quality is to be consistently raised in the long term. ●

● Marilyn Higgins, Senior Lecturer, School of the Built Environment, Heriot-Watt University and Leslie Forsyth, Coordinator of the Postgraduate Programmes in Urban Design and Head of the School of Architecture, Edinburgh College of Art